



Yiddish language Botwin Company newsletter (above) and a replica of the company's banner (right) being carried at a commemoration in Warsaw last year.



## GERBEN ZAAGSMA

writes about his new book exploring the reasons why so many Jews joined the International Brigades.

# Fighting fascism and the passivity myth

In 2001 I studied Yiddish in London. During one of my courses entitled Yiddish for Historians, we were discussing the so-called *yizker bikher*, memorial books written after the Second World War that describe the history and ultimate destruction of local Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. A fellow student, who had studied the memorial book on Bełchatów in Poland, told us that it contained the story of a Jewish volunteer from that city who had left to fight in the International Brigades.

Soon afterwards I discovered that London University's SOAS library held copies of several Yiddish memoirs of Jewish volunteers. I decided to devote myself to studying this topic, in particular the Naftali Botwin Company, a Jewish unit founded on 12 December 1937 within the Polish Dombrowski Brigade on the instigation of Jewish communists in Paris, most of them migrants from Poland.

Researching the topic, two things struck me: the high number of Jewish volunteers in the International Brigades, and the way that the Holocaust is the main prism that is used to explain and evaluate their participation in the Spanish Civil War.

The struggle of the volunteers of Jewish descent is often presented as the first act of Jewish resistance against fascist anti-semitism and, ultimately, against Hitler (Franco's ally in Spain), and the Nazi extermination policy that culminated in the Holocaust.

Much of what has been written about the Jewish volunteers therefore places them within a larger Jewish resistance narrative that aims to counter the myth of Jewish passivity in the face of the Nazi onslaught.

The large proportion of Jewish volunteers is often interpreted as indicative of a specific Jewish motivation to fight in Spain. However, my view is that this mainly reflected the relatively large proportion of Jews active in the socialist and communist movements at the time.

I expanded my studies to answer two key questions. To what extent did Jewishness and Jewish concerns matter during the Spanish Civil War? And why was a Jewish company founded in the International Brigades?

After several years of research the result is a book, 'Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War', in which I explore the meaning of the participation of Jewish volunteers in Spain both during and after the conflict.

What does it actually mean to speak about 'Jewish volunteers'? It is

certainly true that many Eastern European Jewish volunteers considered themselves to be part of a Jewish national minority in their home countries, or were regarded as such. But that does not automatically imply that their motivation to go and fight in Spain was specifically Jewish; in many cases theirs was an ideological choice.

Why was the Botwin Company formed? Again, the company's short-lived history should first and foremost be seen within the context of Jewish participation in the communist and socialist movements.

Yet there was another crucial reason for the company's formation: the existence of anti-semitic stereotypes about 'Jewish cowardice'. These had a long history and were founded, among other things, on allegations of Jewish draft evasion.

The Botwin Company served to emancipate Jewish volunteers as worthy soldiers, equal to their Polish comrades in arms, just as Jewish soldiery in general had always been linked to the project of emancipation. Within this context, the formation of the Botwin Company was ultimately a way to propagate Jewish equality in battle, especially within a Polish-Jewish context.

It is impossible to speak of the experience of Jewish volunteers, during or after the Spanish Civil War, without addressing the two great myths that have loomed so large over their participation and legacy: that of Jewish cowardice, and that of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust.

Spain might not have been the place where a singular category of Jewish volunteer fought a battle against the future murderers of their people, as many contemporary observers would have it. But it was the place where they fought one of the classic anti-semitic stereotypes of the 19th and 20th centuries: that of the Jew as a coward, of someone who will shy away from action.

In that sense, the volunteers, as recounted in my book, whether they were self-consciously Jewish or not, constitute one of the many chapters in the ongoing project of Jewish modernity as it unfolded from the late 18th century onwards. ▲

Gerben Zaagsma (<http://gerbenzaagsma.org>) is a research fellow at Göttingen University in Germany. See [overleaf](#) for a review of 'Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War'.